

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

Mount Vernon City School District



March 2026

## Talk with your child about why attending every class matters

It's common for middle schoolers to think that skipping a class—or even several— isn't a big deal. But the fact is, the consequences of missing classes can be tough on your middle schooler, especially during the second half of the school year.

Here's why:

- **The amount of time left** in the year for instruction is limited, and every class is packed with essential material to help students stay on track.
- **Absent students miss the opportunity** to ask questions and get needed support from teachers.
- **Teachers often pick up the pace** of instruction to allow time for review before end-of-year tests. Since review and new instruction will likely go on at the same time, your child's workload may increase—making it harder to catch up after missing a class.

Emphasize to your child that attendance in every class is important. Then:

- **Accept no excuses** for missing school—except true illness or emergency. Avoid making appointments for your child that result in missing classes.
- **Contact the school** if you need help addressing attendance obstacles.



## Set expectations that fit your child

Families' expectations for children's performance in school can motivate students. Effective expectations are both high *and* reasonable. To determine whether you are setting the bar at the right level, consider:

- **Are my expectations flexible?** If they are based on parenting advice that talks about what your child "should" be doing or feeling at this age, remember that most of that information is based on *averages*. It doesn't necessarily relate to what your individual child should be doing or achieving. Choose goals that are geared to your child, not because "all the other seventh graders are doing it."
- **Am I being realistic?** Think about who your middle schooler really is. For example, has your child always been a reluctant reader? Expecting your student to sign up for a class with a heavy reading load may be asking for more than your child can give without negative consequences. Work together with the teachers to develop expectations that set your child up for learning success.

## Share tips for better notes

Teachers may supply handouts or outlines in class, but students who want to do well should still take notes. Taking notes by hand reinforces material in students' brains, and reviewing notes daily helps them be prepared for the next class. Encourage your child to take notes on:

- **Lists.** "The cycle's eight stages are..."
- **Things the teacher repeats** or writes on the board or displays on a screen.
- **Details and diagrams** that relate to items on teacher handouts.
- **"Extreme" things.** If the teacher says a concept is the *best*, *weakest* or *last*, your child should take note of it.

## Consider your child's side

Everyone wants their point of view to be considered in a discussion. When your middle schooler has something to say, listen and acknowledge valid points. Listening attentively—even if you disagree—helps build your child's confidence to speak up and contribute in class and other areas of life.



## Plant seeds of resilience

When facing challenges, *resilience* allows your child to adapt and move ahead. To nurture resilience, help your child:



- **Enjoy routines**, such as family reading time or Taco Tuesday. Consistency makes kids feel secure.
- **Help others.** Volunteering in the community or reading to a younger child can give your child something to feel proud of when times are tough.

Source: "Resilience for teens: 10 tips to build skills on bouncing back from rough times," American Psychological Association.



## My child won't start work unless I help. What can I do?

**Q:** My middle schooler expects me to provide reminders about assignments, gather supplies and announce when it's time to study. How can I help my child take more responsibility for schoolwork?

**A:** Middle school is as much about learning to be a responsible student as it is about academics. You are right to want to help your child work more independently and rely less on you.

To instill responsibility for learning:

- **Talk to your child.** Say, "I'm happy to support your efforts on schoolwork, but you are leaning on me too much. We are going to shift the responsibility to you. You are ready to handle this."
- **Create a study time routine.** For example, you might say, "Instead of waiting for me to remind you, start your homework one hour after you get home from school every day. It's up to you to get started."
- **Make sure your child has** the necessary tools to work independently, such as school supplies and a planner to record and track assignments.
- **Teach problem-solving.** Discuss steps your child can take to find resources and get help.
- **Stand back.** Your middle schooler may forget an assignment or two while getting used to this new role. Resist the urge to take over again. Instead, let your child experience the consequences of not doing work.



## Are you supporting math success?

Some students seem to be defeated by math before they ever learn it. Others thrive on the challenge. Are you doing everything you can to help your middle schooler master math? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

1. **Do you talk** with your child about ways you use math every day—on the job and in running a household?
2. **Do you point out** ways math can be useful for doing things that interest your child?
3. **Do you play** games with your child that use math skills?
4. **Do you assure** your child that anyone can learn math—all it takes is regular practice?
5. **Do you avoid** saying things like, "I don't blame you for hating math. I did, too," and say instead,

"It does look challenging, but I know you can figure this out?"

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are helping your child feel positive about math. For each no, try that idea.*

"Math is like going to the gym for your brain. It sharpens your mind."

—Danica McKellar

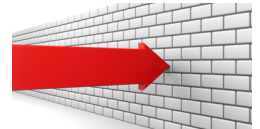
## Turn mistakes into learning

Graded work offers an important way to learn—from mistakes. Encourage your middle schooler to take these steps:

1. **Think about what went right.**
2. **Figure out what went wrong.** Did your child not follow directions? Get confused about a concept?
3. **Fix the errors.** If your child doesn't understand the material, this might involve asking the teacher for help.
4. **Confirm learning** by applying knowledge to a new situation. Your child could try solving a problem that is similar to the one that was wrong, for example.

## Construct effective limits

Middle schoolers need limits, but they love to test them. To set rules that will hold:



- **Be specific** about expected behaviors.
- **Give the reasons** for your rules.
- **Get your child's input.** You may not follow the suggestions, but listen to them.
- **Set and enforce** reasonable consequences for misbehavior.

## Check in on well-being

Stress is an obstacle to learning, so it's important to keep an eye on your middle schooler's stress levels. Here's how:

- **Ask regularly** about school, friends and activities. "What was the best thing that happened today? The worst?"
- **Be aware of influences** in your child's life. Get to know your child's friends. Monitor online activity.
- **Pay attention to changes** in your child's interests, energy levels and habits.

If you are concerned or uncertain about your child's well-being, consult your pediatrician.

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